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THE BLUEBIRD

By

JOHN BURROUGHS

TO WHICH IS ADDED

THE INVITATION

BY THE SAME AUTHOR



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THE BLUEBIRD.

WHEN Nature made the bluebird she wished to propitiate both the sky and the earth, so she gave him the color of the one on his back and the hue of the other on his breast, and ordained that his appearance in spring should denote that the strife and war between these two elements was at an end. He is the peace-harbinger ; in him the celestial and terrestrial strike hands and are fast friends. He means the furrow and he means the warmth ; he means all the soft, wooing influences of the spring on the one hand, and the retreating footsteps of winter on the other.

It is sure to be a bright March morning when you first hear his note ; and it is as if the milder influences up above had found a voice and let a word fall upon your ear, so tender is it and so prophetic, — a hope tinged with a regret.

“ *Bermuda! Bermuda! Bermuda!* ” he seems to say, as if both invoking and lament-

ing, and behold ! Bermuda follows close, though the little pilgrim may be only repeating the tradition of his race, himself having come only from Florida, the Carolinas, or even from Virginia, where he has found his Bermuda on some broad, sunny hill-side thickly studded with cedars and persimmon trees.

In New York and in New England the sap starts up in the sugar-maple the very day the bluebird arrives, and sugar-making begins forthwith. The bird is generally a mere disembodied voice ; a rumor in the air for two or three days before it takes visible shape before you. The males are the pioneers, and come several days in advance of the females. By the time both are here and the pair have begun to prospect for a place to nest, sugar-making is over, the last vestige of snow has disappeared, and the plough is brightening its mould-board in the new furrow.

The bluebird enjoys the preëminence of being the first bit of color that cheers our northern landscape. The other birds that arrive about the same time — the sparrow, the robin, the phœbe-bird — are clad in neutral tints, gray, brown, or russet ; but

the bluebird brings one of the primary hues and the divinest of them all.

This bird also has the distinction of answering very nearly to the robin redbreast of English memory, and was by the early settlers of New England christened the blue-robin.

It is a size or two larger, and the ruddy hue of its breast does not verge so nearly on an orange, but the manners and habits of the two birds are very much alike. Our bird has the softest voice, but the English redbreast is much the most skilled musician. He has indeed a fine, animated warble, heard nearly the year through about English gardens and along the old hedge-rows, that is quite beyond the compass of our bird's instrument. On the other hand, our bird is associated with the spring as the British species cannot be, being a winter resident also, while the brighter sun and sky of the New World has given him a coat that far surpasses that of his transatlantic cousin.

It is worthy of remark that among British birds there is no *blue* bird. The cerulean tint seems much rarer among the feathered tribes there than here. On this continent

there are at least three species of the common bluebird, while in all our woods there are the blue-jay and the indigo-bird, — the latter so intensely blue as to fully justify its name. There is also the blue grossbeak, not much behind the indigo-bird in intensity of color; and among our warblers the blue tint is very common.

It is interesting to know that the bluebird is not confined to any one section of the country; and that when one goes West he will still have this favorite with him, though a little changed in voice and color, just enough to give variety without marring the identity.

The Western bluebird is considered a distinct species, and is perhaps a little more brilliant and showy than its Eastern brother; and Nuttall thinks its song is more varied, sweet, and tender. Its color approaches to ultramarine, while it has a sash of chestnut-red across its shoulders, — all the effects, I suspect, of that wonderful air and sky of California, and of those great Western plains; or if one goes a little higher up into the mountainous regions of the West, he finds the Arctic bluebird, the ruddy brown on the breast changed to greenish-blue, and the

wings longer and more pointed ; in other respects not differing much from our species.

The bluebird usually builds its nest in a hole in a stump or stub, or in an old cavity excavated by a woodpecker, when such can be had ; but its first impulse seems to be to start in the world in much more style, and the happy pair make a great show of house-hunting about the farm-buildings, now half persuaded to appropriate a dove-cot, then discussing in a lively manner a last year's swallow's nest, or proclaiming with much flourish and flutter that they have taken the wren's house, or the tenement of the purple martin ; till finally nature becomes too urgent, when all this pretty make-believe ceases, and most of them settle back upon the old family stumps and knot-holes in remote fields, and go to work in earnest.

In such situations the female is easily captured by approaching very stealthily and covering the entrance to the nest. The bird seldom makes any effort to escape, seeing how hopeless the case is, and keeps her place on the nest till she feels your hand closing around her. I have looked down into the cavity and seen the poor thing palpitating with fear and looking up with distended

eyes, but never moving till I had withdrawn a few paces; then she rushes out with a cry that brings the male on the scene in a hurry. He warbles and lifts his wings beseechingly, but shows no anger or disposition to scold and complain, like most birds. Indeed, this bird seems incapable of uttering a harsh note, or of doing a spiteful, ill-tempered thing.

The ground-builders all have some art or device to decoy one away from the nest, affecting lameness, a crippled wing, or a broken back, promising an easy capture if pursued. The tree-builders depend upon concealing the nest or placing it beyond reach. But the bluebird has no art either way, and its nest is easily found.

About the only enemies the sitting bird or the nest is in danger of, are snakes and squirrels. I knew of a farm-boy who was in the habit of putting his hand down into a bluebird's nest and taking out the old bird whenever he came that way. One day he put his hand in, and feeling something peculiar, withdrew it hastily, when it was instantly followed by the head and neck of an enormous black snake. The boy took to his heels, and the snake gave chase, pressing

him close till a ploughman near by came to the rescue with his ox-whip.

There never was a happier or more devoted husband than the male bluebird is. But among nearly all our familiar birds the serious cares of life seem to devolve almost entirely upon the female. The male is hilarious and demonstrative; the female, serious and anxious about her charge. The male is the attendant of the female, following her wherever she goes. He never leads, never directs, but only seconds and applauds. If his life is all poetry and romance, hers is all business and prose. She has no pleasure but her duty, and no duty but to look after her nest and brood. She shows no affection for the male, no pleasure in his society; she only tolerates him as a necessary evil, and if he is killed, goes in quest of another, in the most business-like manner, as you would go for the plumber or the glazier. In most cases the male is the ornamental partner in the firm, and contributes little of the working capital. There seems to be more equality of the sexes among the woodpeckers, wrens, and swallows; while the contrast is greatest perhaps in the bobolink family, where the courting is done in the Arab fashion, the

female fleeing with all her speed, and the male pursuing with equal precipitation ; and were it not for the broods of young birds that appear, it would be hard to believe that the intercourse ever ripened into anything more intimate.

With the bluebirds the male is useful as well as ornamental. He is the gay champion and escort of the female at all times, and while she is sitting he feeds her regularly. It is very pretty to watch them building their nest. The male is very active in hunting out a place and exploring the boxes and cavities, but seems to have no choice in the matter, and is anxious only to please and encourage his mate, who has the practical turn and knows what will do and what will not. After she has suited herself he applauds her immensely, and away the two go in quest of material for the nest, the male acting as guard, and flying above and in advance of the female. She brings all the material, and does all the work of building, he looking on and encouraging her with gesture and song. He acts also as inspector of her work, but I fear is a very partial one. She enters the nest with her bit of dry grass or straw, and having adjusted it to her notion,

withdraws and waits near by while he goes in and looks it over. On coming out he exclaims very plainly, "*Excellent! excellent!*" and away the two go again for more material.

The bluebirds, when they build about the farm-buildings, sometimes come in conflict with the swallows. The past season I knew a pair to take forcible possession of the domicile of a pair of the latter, — the cliff species, that now stick their nests under the eaves of the barn. The bluebirds had been broken up in a little bird-house near by, by the rats or perhaps a weasel, and being no doubt in a bad humor, and the season being well advanced, they made forcible entrance into the adobe tenement of their neighbors, and held possession of it for some days, but I believe finally withdrew, rather than live amid such a squeaky, noisy colony. I have heard that these swallows, when ejected from their homes in that way by the phœbe-bird, have been known to fall to and mason up the entrance to the nest while their enemy was inside of it, thus having a revenge as complete and cruel as anything in human annals.

The bluebirds and the house-wrens more

frequently come into collision. A few years ago I put up a little bird-house in the back end of my garden for the accommodation of the wrens, and every season a pair have taken up their abode there. One spring a pair of bluebirds looked into the tenement, and lingered about several days, leading me to hope that they would conclude to occupy it. But they finally went away, and later in the season the wrens appeared, and after a little coquetting, were regularly installed in their old quarters, and were as happy as only wrens can be.

One of our younger poets, Myron Benton, saw a little bird

“Ruffled with whirlwind of his ecstasies,”

which must have been the wren, as I know of no other bird that so throbs and palpitates with music as this little vagabond. And the pair I speak of seemed exceptionably happy, and the male had a small tornado of song in his crop that kept him “ruffled” every moment in the day. But before their honeymoon was over, the bluebirds returned. I knew something was wrong before I was up in the morning. Instead of that voluble and gushing song outside the window, I heard the wrens scolding and crying at a fearful

rate, and on going out saw the bluebirds in possession of the box. The poor wrens were in despair ; they wrung their hands and tore their hair, after the wren fashion, but chiefly did they rattle out their disgust and wrath at the intruders. I have no doubt that if it could have been interpreted, it would have proven the rankest and most voluble Billingsgate ever uttered. For the wren is saucy, and he has a tongue in his head that can outwag any other tongue known to me.

The bluebirds said nothing, but the male kept an eye on Mr. Wren ; and when he came too near, gave chase, driving him to cover under the fence, or under a rubbish-heap or other object, where the wren would scold and rattle away, while his pursuer sat on the fence or the pea-brush, waiting for him to reappear.

Days passed, and the usurpers prospered and the outcasts were wretched ; but the latter lingered about, watching and abusing their enemies, and hoping, no doubt, that things would take a turn, as they presently did. The outraged wrens were fully avenged. The mother bluebird had laid her full complement of eggs, and was beginning to set, when one day, as her mate was perched

above her on the barn, along came a boy with one of those wicked elastic slings, and cut him down with a pebble. There he lay like a bit of sky fallen upon the grass. The widowed bird seemed to understand what had happened, and without much ado disappeared next day in quest of another mate. How she contrived to make her wants known without trumpeting them about, I am unable to say. But I presume the birds have a way of advertising that answers the purpose well. Maybe she trusted to luck to fall in with some stray bachelor or bereaved male, who would undertake to console a widow of one day's standing. I will say, in passing, that there are no bachelors from choice among the birds; they are all rejected suitors, while old maids are entirely unknown. There is a Jack to every Gill, and some to boot.

The males being more exposed by their song and plumage, and by being the pioneers in migrating, seemed to be slightly in excess, lest the supply fall short, and hence it sometimes happens that a few are bachelors perforce; there are not females enough to go around, but before the season is over there are sure to be some vacancies in the

marital ranks, which they are called on to fill.

In the mean time the wrens were beside themselves with delight ; they fairly screamed with joy. If the male was before "ruffled with whirlwind of his ecstasies," he was now in danger of being rent asunder. He inflated his throat and carolled as wren never carolled before. And the female, too, how she cackled and darted about ! How busy they both were ! Rushing into the nest, they hustled those eggs out in less than a minute, wren time. They carried in new material, and by the third day were fairly installed again in their old quarters ; but on the third day, so rapidly are these little dramas played, the female bluebird reappeared with another mate. Ah ! how the wren stock went down then ! What dismay and despair filled again those little breasts ! It was pitiful. They did not scold as before, but after a day or two, withdrew from the garden, dumb with grief, and gave up the struggle.

The bluebird, finding her eggs gone and her nest changed, seemed suddenly seized with alarm and shunned the box ; or else, finding she had less need for another husband than she thought, repented her rashness and

wanted to dissolve the compact. But the happy bridegroom would not take the hint, and exerted all his eloquence to comfort and reassure her. He was fresh and fond, and until this bereaved female found him, I am sure his suit had not prospered that season. He thought the box just the thing, and that there was no need of alarm, and spent days in trying to persuade the female back. Seeing he could not be a step-father to a family, he was quite willing to assume a nearer relation. He hovered about the box, he went in and out, he called, he warbled, he entreated; the female would respond occasionally and come and alight near, and even peep into the nest, but would not enter it, and quickly flew away again. Her mate would reluctantly follow, but he was soon back, uttering the most confident and cheering calls. If she did not come, he would perch above the nest and sound his loudest notes over and over again, looking in the direction of his mate, and beckoning with every motion. But she responded less and less frequently. Some days I would see him only, but finally he gave it up; the pair disappeared, and the box remained deserted the rest of the summer.

THE INVITATION.

YEARS ago, when quite a youth, I was rambling in the woods one Sunday with my brothers, gathering black birch, wintergreens, etc., when, as we reclined upon the ground, gazing vaguely up into the trees, I caught sight of a bird that paused a moment on a branch above me, the like of which I had never before seen or heard of. It was probably the blue yellow-backed warbler, as I have since found this to be a common bird in those woods; but to my young fancy it seemed like some fairy bird, so curiously marked was it, and so new and unexpected. I saw it a moment as the flickering leaves parted, noted the white spot on its wing, and it was gone. How the thought of it clung to me afterward! It was a revelation. It was the first intimation I had had that the woods we knew so well held birds that we knew not at all. Were our eyes and ears so dull, then? There was the robin, the blue-jay, the bluebird, the yellow-bird, the cherry-

bird, the cat-bird, the chipping-bird, the woodpecker, the high-hole, an occasional red-bird, and a few others, in the woods, or along their borders : but who ever dreamed that there were still others that not even the hunters saw, and whose names no one had ever heard ?

When, one summer day, later in life, I took my gun, and went to the woods again, in a different though perhaps a less simple spirit, I found my youthful vision more than realized. There were indeed other birds, plenty of them, singing, nesting, breeding, among the familiar trees, which I had before passed by unheard and unseen.

It is a surprise that awaits every student of ornithology, and the thrill of delight that accompanies it, and the feeling of fresh, eager inquiry that follows, can hardly be awakened by any other pursuit. Take the first step in ornithology, procure one new specimen, and you are ticketed for the whole voyage. There is a fascination about it quite overpowering. It fits so well with other things — with fishing, hunting, farming, walking, camping-out — with all that takes one to the fields and woods. One may go a blackberrying and make some rare dis-

covery; or while driving his cow to pasture hear a new song, or make a new observation. Secrets lurk on all sides. There is news in every bush. Expectation is ever on tiptoe. What no man ever saw before may the next moment be revealed to you. What a new interest the woods have! How you long to explore every nook and corner of them! You would even find consolation in being lost in them. You could then hear the night birds and the owls, and in your wanderings, might stumble upon some unknown specimen.

In all excursions to the woods or to the shore, the student of ornithology has an advantage over his companions. He has one more resource, one more avenue of delight. He indeed kills two birds with one stone, and sometimes three. If others wander, he can never go out of his way. His game is everywhere. The cawing of a crow makes him feel at home, while a new note or a new song drowns all care. Audubon, on the desolate coast of Labrador, is happier than any king ever was, and on shipboard is nearly cured of his sea-sickness when a new gull appears in sight.

One must taste it to understand or ap-

preciate its fascination. The looker-on sees nothing to inspire such enthusiasm. Only a little feathers and a half-musical note or two; why all this ado? "Who would give a hundred and twenty dollars to know about the birds?" said an Eastern governor, half contemptuously, to Wilson, as the latter solicited a subscription to his great work. Sure enough. Bought knowledge is dear at any price. The most precious things have no commercial value. It is not, your Excellency, mere technical knowledge of the birds that you are asked to purchase, but a new interest in the fields and woods, a new moral and intellectual tonic, a new key to the treasure-house of nature. Think of the many other things your Excellency would get: the air, the sunshine, the healing fragrance and coolness, and the many respites from the knavery and turmoil of political life.

Yesterday was an October day of rare brightness and warmth. I spent the most of it in a wild, wooded gorge of Rock Creek. A persimmon-tree which stood upon the bank had dropped some of its fruit in the water. As I stood there, half-leg deep, picking them up, a wood-duck came flying down the creek, and passed over my head. Pres-

ently it returned, flying up; then it came back again, and sweeping low around a bend, prepared to alight in a still, dark reach in the creek which was hidden from my view. As I passed that way about half an hour afterward, the duck started up, uttering its wild alarm note. In the stillness I could hear the whistle of its wings and the splash of the water when it took flight. Near by I saw where a raccoon had come down to the water for fresh clams, leaving his long, sharp track in the mud and sand. Before I had passed this hidden stretch of water, a pair of those mysterious thrushes, the gray-cheeked, flew up from the ground, and perched on a low branch.

Who can tell how much this duck, this footprint in the sand, and these strange thrushes from the far North, enhanced the interest and charm of the autumn woods?

Ornithology cannot be learned satisfactorily from the books. The satisfaction is in learning it from nature. One must have an original experience with the birds. The books are only the guide, the invitation. Though there remain not another new species to describe, any young person with health and enthusiasm has opened to him or

her the whole field anew, and is eligible to experience all the thrill and delight of original discoverers.

But let me say, in the same breath, that the books can by no manner of means be dispensed with. A copy of Wilson or Audubon, for reference and to compare notes with, is invaluable. In lieu of these, access to some large museum or collection would be a great help. In the beginning, one finds it very difficult to identify a bird from any verbal description. Reference to a colored plate, or to a stuffed specimen, at once settles the matter. This is the chief value of the books: they are charts to sail by; the route is mapped out, and much time and labor thereby saved. First find your bird; observe its ways, its song, its calls, its flight, its haunts; then shoot it (not ogle it with a glass), and compare with Audubon. In this way the feathered kingdom may soon be conquered.

The ornithologists divide and subdivide the birds into a great many families, orders, genera, species, etc., which at first sight are apt to confuse and discourage the reader. But any interested person can acquaint himself with most of our song-birds,

by keeping in mind a few general divisions and observing the characteristics of each. By far the greater number of our land-birds are either warblers, vireos, fly-catchers, thrushes, or finches.

The warblers are perhaps the most puzzling. These are the true *Sylvia*, the real wood-birds. They are small, very active, but feeble songsters, and to be seen must be sought for. In passing through the woods most persons have a vague consciousness of slight chirping, semi-musical sounds in the trees overhead. In most cases these sounds proceed from the warblers. Throughout the Middle and Eastern States half a dozen species or so may be found in almost every locality, as the redstart,¹ the Maryland yellow-throat, the yellow warbler (not the common goldfinch, with black cap, and black wings and tail), the hooded warbler, the black and white creeping warbler ; or others, according to the locality and the character of the woods. In pine or hemlock woods, one species may predominate ; in maple or oak woods, or in

¹ I am aware that the redstart is generally classed among the fly-catchers, but its song, its form, and its habits are in every respect those of a warbler. Its main fly-catcher mark is its beak, but to the *muscipapa* proper it presents little or no resemblance to the general observer.

mountainous districts, another. The subdivision of ground warblers, the most common members of which are the Maryland yellow-throat, the Kentucky warbler, and the mourning ground warbler, is usually found in low, wet, bushy, or half-open woods, often on, and always near, the ground.

The summer yellow-bird, or yellow warbler, is not now a wood-bird at all, being found in orchards and parks, and along streams, and in the trees of villages and cities.

As we go north the number of warblers increases, till, in the northern part of New England, and in the Canadas, as many as ten or twelve varieties may be found breeding in June. Audubon found the black-poll warbler breeding in Labrador, and congratulates himself on being the first white man who had ever seen its nest. When these warblers pass north in May, they seem to go singly or in pairs, and their black caps and striped coats show conspicuously. When they return in September, they are in troops or loose flocks, are of a uniform dull drab or brindlish color, and are very fat. They scour the tree-tops for a few days, almost eluding the eye by their quick movements, and are gone.

According to my own observation, the number of species of warblers which one living in the middle districts sees, on their return in the fall, is very small, compared with the number he may observe migrating North in the spring.

The yellow-rumped warblers are the most noticeable of all in the autumn. They come about the streets and garden, and seem especially drawn to dry, leafless trees. They dart spitefully about, uttering a sharp chirp. In Washington I have seen them in the outskirts all winter.

Audubon figures and describes over forty different warblers. More recent writers have divided and subdivided the group very much, giving new names to new classifications. But this part is of interest and value only to the professional ornithologist.

The finest songster among the *Sylviæ*, according to my notions, is the black-throated greenback. Its song is sweet and clear, but brief. The rarest of the species are Swainson's warbler, said to be disappearing; the cerulean warbler, said to be abundant about Niagara; and the mourning ground warbler, which I have found breeding about the head-waters of the Delaware, in New York.

The vireos, or greenlets, are a sort of connecting link between the warblers and the true fly-catchers, and partake of the characteristics of both.

The red-eyed vireo, whose sweet soliloquy is one of the most constant and cheerful sounds in our woods and groves, is perhaps the most noticeable and abundant species. The vireos are a little larger than the warblers, and are far less brilliant and variegated in color.

There are four species found in most of our woods, namely, the red-eyed vireo, the white-eyed vireo, the warbling vireo, and the solitary vireo, — the red-eyed and warbling being most abundant, and the white-eyed being the most lively and animated songster. I meet the latter bird only in the thick, bushy growths of low, swampy localities, where, eluding the observer, it pours forth its song with a sharpness and a rapidity of articulation that are truly astonishing. This strain is very marked, and though inlaid with the notes of several other birds, is entirely unique. The iris of this bird is white, as that of the red-eyed is red, though in neither case can this mark be distinguished at more than two or three

yards. In most cases the iris of birds is a dark hazel, which passes for black.

The basket-like nest, pendent to the low branches in the woods, which the falling leaves of autumn reveal to all passers, is in most cases the nest of the red-eyed, though the solitary constructs a similar tenement, but in much more remote and secluded localities.

The general color of this group of birds is very light ash beneath, becoming darker above, with a tinge of green. The red-eyed has a crown of a bluish tinge.

Most birds exhibit great alarm and distress, usually with a strong dash of anger, when you approach their nests; but the demeanor of the red-eyed, on such an occasion, is an exception to this rule. The parent birds move about softly amid the branches above, eying the intruder with a curious, innocent look, uttering, now and then, a subdued note or plaint, solicitous and watchful, but making no demonstration of anger or distress.

The birds, no more than the animals, like to be caught napping; but I remember, one autumn day, of coming upon a red-eyed vireo that was clearly oblivious to all that was

passing around it. It was a young bird, though full grown, and it was taking its *siesta* on a low branch in a remote heathery field. Its head was snugly stowed away under its wing, and it would have fallen an easy prey to the first hawk that came along. I approached noiselessly, and when within a few feet of it paused to note its breathings, so much more rapid and full than our own. A bird has greater lung capacity than any other living thing, hence more animal heat, and life at a higher pressure. When I reached out my hand and carefully closed it around the winged sleeper, its sudden terror and consternation almost paralyzed it. Then it struggled and cried piteously, and when released, hastened and hid itself in some near bushes. I never expected to surprise it thus a second time.

The fly-catchers are a larger group than the vireos, with stronger marked characteristics. They are not properly songsters, but are classed by some writers as screechers. Their pugnacious dispositions are well known, and they not only fight among themselves, but are incessantly quarrelling with their neighbors. The king-bird, or tyrant fly-catcher, might serve as the type of the order.

The common pewee excites the most pleasant emotions, both on account of its plaintive note and its exquisite mossy nest.

The phœbe-bird is the pioneer of the fly-catchers, and comes in April, sometimes in March. It comes familiarly about the house and out-buildings, and usually builds beneath hay-sheds or under bridges.

The fly-catchers always take their insect prey on the wing, by a sudden darting or swooping movement; often a very audible snap of the beak may be heard.

These birds are the least elegant, both in form and color, of any of our feathered neighbors. They have short legs, a short neck, large heads, and broad, flat beaks, with bristles at the base. They often fly with a peculiar quivering movement of the wings, and when at rest, oscillate their tails at short intervals.

There are found in the United States nineteen species. In the Middle and Eastern districts, one may observe in summer, without any special search, about five of them, namely, the king-bird, the phœbe-bird, the wood-pewee, the great-crested fly-catcher (distinguished from all others by the bright ferruginous color of its tail), and the small green-crested fly-catcher.

The thrushes are the birds of real melody, and will afford one more delight perhaps than any other class. The robin is the most familiar example. Their manners, flight, and form are the same in each species. See the robin hop along upon the ground, strike an attitude, scratch for a worm, fix his eye upon something before him or upon the beholder, flip his wings suspiciously, fly straight to his perch, or sit at sundown on some high branch, carolling his sweet and honest strain, and you have seen what is characteristic of all the thrushes. Their carriage is preëminently marked by grace, and their songs by melody.

Beside the robin, which is in no sense a wood-bird, we have, in New York, the wood-thrush, the hermit-thrush, the veery, or Wilson's thrush, the olive-backed thrush, and transiently, one or two other species not so clearly defined.

The wood-thrush and the hermit stand at the head as songsters, no two persons perhaps agreeing as to which is the superior.

Under the general head of finches, Audubon describes over sixty different birds, ranging from the sparrows to the grossbeaks, and including the buntings, the linnets, the snow-birds, the cross-bills, and the red-birds.

We have nearly or quite a dozen varieties of the sparrow in the Atlantic States, but perhaps no more than half that number would be discriminated by the unprofessional observer. The song-sparrow, which every child knows, comes first ; at least, his voice is first heard. And can there be anything more fresh and pleasing than this first simple strain, heard from the garden fence or a near hedge, on some bright, still March morning ?

The field, or vesper-sparrow, called also grass-finch, and bay-winged sparrow, a bird slightly larger than the song-sparrow, and of a lighter gray color, is abundant in all our upland fields and pastures, and is a very sweet songster. It builds upon the ground, without the slightest cover or protection, and also roosts there. Walking through the fields, at dusk, I frequently start them up almost beneath my feet. When disturbed by day they fly with a quick, sharp movement, showing two white quills in the tail. The traveller along the country roads disturbs them earthing their wings in the soft, dry earth, or sees them skulking and flitting along the fences in front of him. They run in the furrow in advance of the team, or

perch upon the stones a few rods off. They sing much after sundown, hence the aptness of the name vesper-sparrow, which a recent writer, Wilson Flagg, has bestowed upon them.

In the meadows and low, wet lands, the Savannah sparrow is met with, and may be known by its fine, insect-like song. In the swamp, the swamp-sparrow.

The fox-sparrow, the largest and handsomest species of this family, comes to us in the fall, from the North, where it breeds. Likewise the tree, or Canada sparrow, and the white-crowned and white-throated sparrows.

The social-sparrow, *alias* "hair-bird," *alias* "red-headed chipping-bird," is the smallest of the sparrows, and, I believe, the only one that builds in trees.

The finches, as a class, all have short, conical bills, with tails more or less forked. The purple finch heads the list in varied musical ability.

Beside the groups of our more familiar birds which I have thus hastily outlined, there are numerous other groups, more limited in specimens, but comprising some of our best known songsters. The bobolink,

for instance, has properly no congener. The famous mocking-bird of the Southern States belongs to a genus which has but two other representatives in the Atlantic States, namely, the cat-bird and the long-tailed or ferruginous thrush.

The wrens are a large and interesting family, and as songsters are noted for vivacity and volubility. The more common species are the house-wren, the wood-wren, the marsh-wren, the great Carolina wren, and the winter-wren, the latter perhaps deriving its name from the fact that it breeds in the North. It is an exquisite songster, and pours forth its notes so rapidly and with such sylvan sweetness and cadence, that it seems to *go off* like a musical alarm.

Wilson called the kinglets wrens, but they have little to justify the name, except their song, which is of the same continuous, gushing, lyrical character as that referred to above. Dr. Brewer was entranced with the song of one of these tiny minstrels in the woods of New Brunswick, and thought he had found the author of the strain of the black-poll warbler. He seems loath to believe that a bird so small as either of the kinglets could possess such vocal powers. It

may indeed have been the winter-wren, but from my own observation I believe the golden-crowned kinglet quite capable of such a performance.

But I must leave this part of the subject and hasten on. As to works on ornithology, Audubon's, though its expense puts it beyond the reach of the mass of readers, is, by far the most full and accurate. His drawings surpass all others in accuracy and spirit, while his enthusiasm and devotion to the work he had undertaken have but few parallels in the history of science. His chapter on the wild goose is as good as a poem. One readily overlooks his style, which is often verbose and affected, in consideration of enthusiasm so genuine and purpose so single.

There has never been a keener eye than Audubon's, though there have been more discriminative ears. Nuttall, for instance, is far more happy in his descriptions of the songs and notes of birds, and more to be relied upon. Audubon thinks the song of the Louisiana water-thrush equal to that of the European nightingale, and as he had heard both birds, one would think was prepared to judge. Yet he has no doubt overrated the

one, and underrated the other. The song of the water-thrush is very brief, compared with the philomel's, and its quality is brightness and vivacity, while that of the latter bird, if the books are to be credited, is melody and harmony. Again, he says the song of the blue grossbeak resembles the bobolink's, which it does about as much as the color of the two birds resembles each other; one is black and white, and the other is blue. The song of the wood-wagtail, he says, consists of a "short succession of simple notes beginning with emphasis and gradually falling." The truth is they run up the scale instead of down; beginning low and ending in a shriek.

Yet considering the extent of Audubon's work, the wonder is the errors are so few. I can at this moment recall but one observation of his, the contrary of which I have proved to be true. In his account of the bobolink, he makes a point of the fact that in returning South in the fall they do not travel by night, as they do when moving North in the spring. In Washington I have heard their calls, as they flew over at night, for four successive autumns. As he devoted the whole of a long life to the subject, and

figured and described over four hundred species, one feels a real triumph on finding in our common woods a bird not described in his work. I have seen but two. Walking in the woods one day in early fall, in the vicinity of West Point, I started up a thrush that was sitting on the ground. It alighted on a branch a few yards off, and looked new to me. I thought I had never before seen so long-legged a thrush. I shot it, and saw that it was a new acquaintance. Its peculiarities were its broad, square tail; the length of its legs, which were three and three quarters inches from the end of the middle toe to the hip-joint; and the deep uniform olive-brown of the upper parts, and the gray of the lower. It proved to be the gray-cheeked thrush named and first described by Professor Baird. But little seems to be known concerning it, except that it breeds in the far North, even on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. I would go a good way to hear its song.

The present season I met with a pair of them near Washington as mentioned above. In size this bird approaches the wood-thrush, being larger than either the hermit or the veery; unlike all other species, no part of

its plumage has a tawny or yellowish tinge. The other specimen was the Northern or small water-thrush, cousin-german to the oven-bird, and half-brother to the Louisiana water-thrush or wagtail. I found it at the head of a remote mountain lake among the sources of the Delaware, where it evidently had a nest. It usually breeds much farther North. It has a strong, clear warble, which at once suggests the song of its congener. I have not been able to find any account of this particular species in the books, though it seems to be well known.

More recent writers and explorers have added to Audubon's list over three hundred new species, the greater number of which belong to the Northern and Western parts of the Continent. Audubon's observations were confined mainly to the Atlantic and Gulf States and the adjacent islands; hence the Western or Pacific birds were but little known to him, and are only briefly mentioned in his works.

It is, by the way, a little remarkable how many of the Western birds seem merely duplicates of the Eastern. Thus, the varied-thrush of the West is our robin, a little differently marked; and the red-shafted

woodpecker is our golden-wing, or high-hole, colored red instead of yellow. There is also a Western chickadee, a Western che-wink, a Western blue-jay, a Western meadow-lark, a Western snow-bird, a Western bluebird, a Western song-sparrow, Western grouse, quail, hen-hawk, etc., etc.

One of the most remarkable birds of the West seems to be a species of skylark, met with on the plains of Dakota, which mounts to the height of three or four hundred feet, and showers down its ecstatic notes. It is evidently akin to several of our Eastern species.

A correspondent writing to me from the country one September says: "I have observed recently a new species of bird here. They alight upon the buildings and fences as well as upon the ground. They are *walkers*." In a few days he obtained one, and sent me the skin. It proved to be what I had anticipated, namely, the American pipit, or titlark, a slender brown bird, about the size of the sparrow, which passes through the States in the fall and spring, to and from its breeding haunts in the far North. They generally appear by twos and threes, or in small, loose flocks, searching for food on banks

and ploughed ground. As they fly up, they show two or three white quills in the tail, like the vesper-sparrow. Flying over, they utter a single chirp or cry every few rods. They breed in the bleak, moss-covered rocks of Labrador. Their eggs have also been found in Vermont, and I feel quite certain that I saw this bird in the Adirondac Mountains in the month of August. The male launches into the air, and gives forth a brief but melodious song, after the manner of all larks. They are *walkers*. This is a characteristic of but few of our land-birds. By far the greater number are *hoppers*. Note the track of the common snow-bird; the feet are not placed one in front of the other, as in the track of the crow or partridge, but side by side. The sparrows, thrushes, warblers, woodpeckers, buntings, etc., are all hoppers. On the other hand, all aquatic or semi-aquatic birds are walkers. The plovers and sand-pipers and snipes run rapidly. Among the land-birds, the grouse, pigeons, quails, larks, and various blackbirds, walk. The swallows walk, also, whenever they use their feet at all, but very awkwardly. The larks walk with ease and grace. Note the meadow-lark strutting about all day in the meadows.

Besides being walkers, the larks, or birds allied to the larks, all sing upon the wing, usually poised or circling in the air, with a hovering, tremulous flight. The meadow-lark occasionally does this in the early part of the season. At such times its long-drawn note or whistle becomes a rich, amorous warble.

The bobolink, also, has both characteristics, and notwithstanding the difference of form and build, etc., is very suggestive of the English skylark, as it figures in the books, and is, no doubt, fully its equal as a songster.

Of our small wood-birds we have three varieties, east of the Mississippi, closely related to each other, which I have already spoken of, and which walk and sing, more or less, on the wing, namely, the two species of water-thrush, or wagtails, and the oven-bird, or wood-wagtail. The latter is the most common, and few observers of the birds can have failed to notice its easy, gliding walk. Its other lark trait, namely, singing in the air, seems not to have been observed by any naturalist. Yet, it is a well established characteristic, and may be verified by any person who will spend a half hour in the

woods where this bird abounds, on some June afternoon or evening. I hear it very frequently after sundown, when the ecstatic singer can hardly be distinguished against the sky. I know of a high, bald-top mountain, where I have sat late in the afternoon, and heard them as often as one every minute. Sometimes the bird would be far below me, sometimes near at hand; and very frequently the singer would be hovering a hundred feet above the summit. He would start from the trees on one side of the open space, reach his climax in the air, and plunge down on the other side. Its descent after the song is finished is very rapid, and precisely like that of the titlark when it sweeps down from its course to alight on the ground.

I first verified this observation some years ago. I had long been familiar with the song, but had only strongly suspected the author of it, when, as I was walking in the woods one evening, just as the leaves were putting out, I saw one of these birds but a few rods from me. I was saying to myself, half audibly, "Come, now, show off, if it is you; I have come to the woods expressly to settle this point," when it began to ascend, by short hops and flights, through the

branches, uttering a sharp, preliminary chirp. I followed it with my eye; saw it mount into the air and circle over the woods, and saw it sweep down again and dive through the trees, almost to the very perch from which it had started.

As the paramount question in the life of a bird is the question of food, perhaps the most serious troubles our feathered neighbors encounter are early in the spring, after the supply of fat with which nature stores every corner and by-place of the system, thereby anticipating the scarcity of food, has been exhausted, and the sudden and severe changes in the weather which occur at this season make unusual demands upon their vitality. No doubt many of the earlier birds die from starvation and exposure at this season. Among a troop of Canada sparrows, which I came upon one March day, all of them evidently much reduced, one was so feeble that I caught it in my hand.

During the present season, a very severe cold spell the first week in March drove the bluebirds to seek shelter about the houses and out-buildings. As night approached, and the winds and the cold increased, they seemed filled with apprehension and alarm,

and in the outskirts of the city came about the windows and doors, crept behind the blinds, clung to the gutters and beneath the cornice, flitted from porch to porch, and from house to house, seeking in vain for some safe retreat from the cold. The street pump, which had a small opening, just over the handle, was an attraction which they could not resist. And yet they seemed aware of the insecurity of the position; for no sooner would they stow themselves away into the interior of the pump, to the number of six or eight, than they would rush out again, as if apprehensive of some approaching danger. Time after time the cavity was filled and refilled, with blue and brown intermingled, and as often emptied. Presently they tarried longer than usual, when I made a sudden sally and captured three, that found a warmer and safer lodging for the night in the cellar.

In the fall, birds and fowls of all kinds become very fat. The squirrels and mice lay by a supply of food in their dens and retreats; but the birds, to a considerable extent, especially our winter residents, carry an equivalent in their own systems, in the form of adipose tissue. I killed a red-

shouldered hawk, one December, and on removing the skin, found the body completely encased in a coating of fat one quarter of an inch in thickness. Not a particle of muscle was visible. This coating not only serves as a protection against the cold, but supplies the waste of the system, when food is scarce, or fails altogether.

The crows at this season are in the same condition. It is estimated that a crow needs at least half a pound of meat per day ; but it is evident that for weeks and months during the winter and spring, they must subsist on a mere fraction of this amount. I have no doubt a crow or hawk, when in their fall condition, would live two weeks without a morsel of food passing their beaks ; a domestic fowl will do as much. One January, I unwittingly shut a hen under the floor of an out-building, where not a particle of food could be obtained, and where she was entirely unprotected from the severe cold. When the luckless Dominick was discovered, about eighteen days afterward, she was brisk and lively, but fearfully pinched up, and as light as a bunch of feathers. The slightest wind carried her before it. But by judicious feeding she was soon restored.

The circumstance of the bluebirds being emboldened by the cold suggests the fact that the fear of man, which now seems like an instinct in the birds, is evidently an acquired trait, and foreign to them in a state of primitive nature. Every gunner has observed, to his chagrin, how wild the pigeons become after a few days of firing among them ; and to his delight, how easy it is to approach near his game in new or unfrequented woods. Professor Baird tells me that a correspondent of theirs visited a small island in the Pacific Ocean, situated about two hundred miles off Cape St. Lucas, to procure specimens. The island was but a few miles in extent, and had probably never been visited half a dozen times by human beings. The naturalist found the birds and water-fowls so tame that it was but a waste of ammunition to shoot them. Fixing a noose on the end of a long stick, he captured them by putting it over their necks, and hauling them to him. In some cases not even this contrivance was needed. A species of mocking-bird, in particular, larger than ours, and a splendid songster, made itself so familiar as to be almost a nuisance, hopping on the table where the collector was

writing, and scattering the pens and paper. Eighteen species were found, twelve of them peculiar to the island.

Thoreau relates that in the woods of Maine the Canada jay will sometimes make its meal with the lumbermen, taking the food out of their hands.

Yet, notwithstanding the birds have come to look upon man as their natural enemy, there can be little doubt that civilization is, on the whole, favorable to their increase and perpetuity, especially to the smaller species. With man come flies and moths, and insects of all kinds in greater abundance; new plants and weeds are introduced, and with the clearing up of the country are sowed broadcast over the land.

The larks and snow-buntings that come to us from the North subsist almost entirely upon the seeds of grasses and plants; and how many of our more common and abundant species are field-birds, and entire strangers to deep forests?

In Europe some birds have become almost domesticated, like the house-sparrow; and in our own country the cliff swallow seems to have entirely abandoned ledges and shelving rocks, as a place to nest, for the eaves and

projections of farms and other out-buildings.

After one has made the acquaintance of most of the land-birds, there remain the sea-shore and its treasures. How little one knows of the aquatic fowls, even after reading carefully the best authorities, was recently forced home to my mind by the following circumstance: I was spending a vacation in the interior of New York, when one day a stranger alighted before the house, and with a cigar box in his hand, approached me as I sat in the doorway. I was about to say that he would waste his time in recommending his cigars to me, as I never smoked, when he said that, hearing I knew something about birds, he had brought me one which had been picked up a few hours before in a hay-field near the village, and which was a stranger to all who had seen it. As he began to undo the box I expected to see some of our own rarer birds, perhaps the rose-breasted gross-beak or Bohemian chatterer. Imagine, then, how I was taken aback, when I beheld, instead, a swallow-shaped bird, quite as large as a pigeon, with forked tail, glossy-black above, and snow-white beneath. Its parti-webbed feet, and its long, graceful wings, at

a glance told that it was a sea-bird ; but as to its name or habitat, I must defer my answer till I could get a peep into Audubon, or some large collection.

The bird had fallen down exhausted in a meadow, and was picked up just as the life was leaving its body. The place must have been one hundred and fifty miles from the sea, as the bird flies. As it was the sooty-tern, which inhabits the Florida Keys, its appearance so far north and so far inland may be considered somewhat remarkable. On removing the skin I found it terribly emaciated. It had no doubt starved to death, ruined by too much wing. Another Icarus. Its great power of flight had made it bold and venturesome, and had carried it so far out of its range that it starved before it could return.

The sooty-tern is sometimes called the sea-swallow, on account of its form and power of flight. It will fly nearly all day at sea, picking up food from the surface of the water. There are several species, some of them strikingly beautiful.

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